



Morning Alert - Tuesday, September 26, 2017

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HEADLINES

Morning news

Most TV networks and national papers led with reports on yesterday's announcement by Prime Minister Abe that he intends to dissolve the Lower House on Sept. 28. They also reported heavily on Tokyo Governor Koike's announcement yesterday that she will be the leader of a new party that was formed on the same day.

POLITICS

Abe to dissolve Diet on Thursday

All papers reported extensively on Prime Minister Abe's press conference on Monday evening, in which he announced his plan to dissolve the House of Representatives on Sept. 28 immediately after an extraordinary Diet session is convened. They projected that a snap election will be held on Oct. 22 following a 12-day official campaign period. The prime minister justified calling a snap election at this juncture by saying that he would like to obtain a fresh mandate from Japanese voters to overcome "paramount national challenges" such as the growing tension on the Korean Peninsula and the rapidly graying and declining population.

In seeking public support for the ruling coalition, the prime minister proposed using tax revenue generated by the consumption tax hike from 8% to 10% in October 2019 for making primary, secondary, and higher education free of charge or less expensive for certain children and students. Abe underscored that since he had previously promised to use the tax revenue to reduce the budget deficit, he needed to seek the voters' judgement without delay on what he called a "significant policy turnaround."

As for criticism that a snap election at this juncture will create a political vacuum in the face of North Korea's relentless provocations, the premier said: "A national election, which is the foundation of democracy, must not be influenced by North Korea's intimidation." He said he plans to ask the voters to endorse his policy of applying "maximum pressure" on the Kim regime. He stated that he will step down if the ruling coalition of the LDP and Komeito fail to win a majority of 233 seats. While the premier did not mention constitutional revision during the press conference, he later told NHK that the LDP will put forward a proposal on revising the nation's supreme law during the election campaign. He projected that the ruling party will propose a revision to make the existence of the SDF explicit.

Abe to trumpet "human resources development"

The papers said Abe chose to highlight "human resources development" as a major campaign issue, questioning whether voters will subscribe to his proposal on diverting consumption tax revenue to the educational sector. Asahi emphasized that Abe has already changed his policy on the consumption tax three times, noting that he has been effectively using the tax issue to give the ruling coalition an advantage in election campaigns.

Governor Koike takes helm of new party

All papers also reported extensively that during a hastily arranged news conference yesterday afternoon, Tokyo Governor Koike explained her decision to become the leader of a new party called "Party of Hope" that she established on Sept. 25 with nine incumbent Diet members, including independent legislator Wakasa and former Environment Minister Hosono. While pointing out that Koike had been cautious about getting involved in national politics at this juncture out of concern that she may be criticized for making light of Tokyo politics, the papers speculated that the popular politician chose to head the new party based on the assessment that it probably will not be able to command public attention unless she plays a major role since it is basically seen as a group of Democratic Party defectors.

The media-savvy governor apparently arranged the press event only a few hours ahead of Prime Minister Abe's press conference on the dissolution of the Lower House in order to steal the spotlight. Mainichi projected that Koike is bound to step up her criticism of the Abe administration during the election campaign in a bid to cast the LDP as being "resistant to reform." Nikkei wrote that Koike is aiming to galvanize centrist voters who are not satisfied with either the LDP or the DP by describing her party as a "conservative force willing to carry out reform."

Concerning her party's platform, Koike said it will seek to phase out nuclear energy, promote women's empowerment, and put an end to Abenomics by opposing Abe's plan to proceed with the planned increase in the consumption tax. As for constitutional amendment, the governor said she is opposed to Abe's idea of only revising Article 9, suggesting that additional constitutional provisions

should be looked into for revision, such as the present two-chamber Diet system and local self-government. According to the articles, soon after the press conference, Koike met with former Prime Minister Koizumi, a vocal critic of nuclear energy, in an apparent attempt to demonstrate to the public that her party is markedly different from the Abe administration, which embraces nuclear energy as a reliable baseload power source.

LDP, DP shocked by Koike's decision to lead new party

The papers said LDP Diet members from Tokyo and its neighboring prefectures in particular are alarmed by Koike's "abrupt" decision to head the new Party of Hope and are bracing for an uphill battle against the new party's candidates in the upcoming election. Meanwhile, the DP leadership is very worried about a potential spate of defections as more of its Diet members may be tempted to abandon the unpopular party and join the Party of Hope to ensure their political survival. One DP defector who decided to join the new party told Asahi: "The election will become a fight between Abe and Koike. The DP will be put on the back burner." Although the DP leadership may try to field its own candidates in single-seat districts where DP defectors plan to run, there is not much time left to find promising candidates. The largest opposition party is also running into difficulties in coordinating with the Japanese Communist Party and other minor opposition groups to field common opposition candidates in single-seat constituencies.

Top LDP official to retire from politics

All papers reported that LDP Vice President Komura met with Prime Minister Abe yesterday and conveyed his intention not to seek a 13th term in the planned general election. The 75-year-old statesman told the press afterward that he has grown too old to continue to serve in the parliament. The paper said the lawyer-turned-politician spearheaded the LDP's discussions on many key and controversial policy issues, such as the comprehensive security laws and constitutional amendment.

AMBASSADOR

Ambassador Hagerty projects FTA discussions during President's trip to Japan

Nikkei gave inside-page coverage to an interview with Ambassador Hagerty conducted in Osaka on Monday, during which he expressed hope that progress will be made on discussions on a possible bilateral free trade agreement when President Trump visits Japan in November. The Ambassador reportedly underscored that an FTA will be "very effective" in correcting the trade imbalance. He also identified the LNG sector as an area where the U.S. can increase exports to Japan under a bilateral trade arrangement. Ambassador Hagerty described North Korea and national security issues as a policy priority, noting that although nobody is hoping for the use of military force to resolve the crisis, military options have not been ruled out. On the recent flight by U.S. bombers near North Korea's eastern border, the Ambassador said it was effective in displaying the existence of military options.

While calling the present U.S.-Japan relations “ironclad,” he voiced hope for increased cultural, sports, and educational exchanges across the Pacific.

INTERNATIONAL

DPRK minister says Pyongyang has right to shoot down U.S. military planes

All papers took up press remarks made in New York on Monday by the North Korean foreign minister, who stressed that Pyongyang regards President Trump’s repeated “insults” of Kim Jong Un as a “declaration of war” and that Pyongyang is entitled to take every possible step for self-defense, including interception, even if U.S. strategic bombers do not enter North Korea’s territorial airspace. The top DPRK diplomat made the comment in response to the DOD’s earlier announcement that two B-1 bombers flew along North Korea’s eastern coastline over the weekend in a “show of force” that got closer to the DPRK border than any other mission this century.

Osaka chief takes issue with comfort woman memorial in San Francisco

Sankei focused on press remarks made yesterday by Osaka Mayor Yoshimura, who said that if the San Francisco authorities decide to condone the comfort woman statue built there recently by local Chinese citizens, he will repeal the sister-city arrangement with the U.S. city. According to the daily, the mayor met with Ambassador Hagerty on the same day and asked for his support so that the San Francisco authorities will not condone the memorial by saying: “I will have no option but to conduct a fundamental review of the sister city arrangement if San Francisco allows it to stand in public space.”

ECONOMY

Aso may skip G20 finance ministers’ meeting

Monday evening’s Nikkei wrote that Finance Minister Aso may skip the G20 meeting of finance ministers and central bank governors to be held in Washington from Oct. 12 to prepare for the general election that is expected to be held on Oct. 22. However, his proxy is expected to attend the G20 meeting and Aso is expected to attend the second round of the U.S.-Japan Economic Dialogue slated for Oct. 16.